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REVIEWS

THE NEW SOCIAL CRITICISM

Most readers will doubtless approve of the phrase, "The Muddle of Criticism," which Miss Gertrude Buck has chosen as the heading for the first chapter in her *Social Criticism of Literature*.¹ For several years Miss Buck has been piloting her pupils at Vassar among the rocks and shoals of English literary criticism, and she now grants to the public an account of the haven to which she has been leading them.

Her book is a small one but full of meat. Chap. i reviews and distinguishes the various types of criticism—scientific, judicial, impressionist, appreciative, and aesthetic—which contend for supremacy. What is needed to harmonize the warring elements is to consider both the writer's and the reader's part and also what contribution each of the traditional types of criticism may make to a higher conception. In this way "the long war of critical theories [may] end in the active peace of co-operation."

On this foundation the writer proceeds to build her conception of the "Larger Criticism." This takes its rise at "that point in the reading-act at which some theory about what is read emerges into consciousness." The process which ensues has three factors, critical reading, critical theory, and critical judgment. The whole is a vitalized conception of literature, taking into account, not only writer and reader, but also the entire social body.

As we advance to consider "Standards of Criticism" we discern more clearly the writer's thesis. Literature, regarded from a social point of view, is a primary means by which the race advances. It must be judged, then, by the social standard, by the degree to which it makes common in society all peculiar advantages of mental endowment and experience. This is the greater which includes the less, sincerity, good form, and other virtues.

At last we are prepared to hear that the critic is not "an oracle, enunciating infallible judgments of literature by an easy comparison of

¹ *The Social Criticism of Literature*. By Gertrude Buck. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1916. \$1.00 net.

any given book with certain accredited models or by an equally mechanical application to it of rules delivered unto us by Aristotle." He is rather a reader like ourselves, holding his opinions tentative and personal, and seeking primarily to provoke genuine reading on the part of others. "To heighten the reader's conscious life by increasing his capacity to read"—this is the true mission of the critic, and this is also the true mission of the teacher of literature.

The book was worth doing for the sake of the college student, who ordinarily is badly in need of enlightenment as to the nature of criticism and his proper relation to it. More important is the service it will render in defining and dignifying a new type of criticism. The university instructor who was moved to exclaim recently, "If we only knew why we are teaching literature!" would do well to read and ponder this thoughtful volume.

H.